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‘Making the tea, chairing the meeting?’ The ebb and flow of feminism and femininities in television representations and professional practice

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Abstract:

Over the last 4 decades, the demands of women in senior positions and/or rising into senior positions have ebbed from – Having It All in the 1980's (Gurley Brown, 1982), flowing into Thinking manager/Thinking male (Schein & Davidson, 1993); whilst encountering the Madonna/whore dichotomy; polarizing both the value and identity of women in the public and private spheres. Then women were asked to Lean in! (Sandberg, 2013). Discourses within these propositions were myriad, yet the arguments were not new, indeed, similar arguments for emancipation may be found in the exchanges between Edmund Burke and Mary Wolstonecroft on - reason versus sensibility (Wollstonecraft; 1792).

In this paper we attempt to develop the discourse on feminism and femininity and in so doing, to bridge the philosophical and often disagreeable/uncomfortable divide between feminism (as a world view) and post feminism (as a critical tool though which to explore the challenges of gender in work and organizations) our aspiration here is to situate our discussions within the historical theoretical developments in feminist thinking and accentuate the relevance of this thinking to organizational practice. This paper develops our existing research into the interdiscursivity of cultural meaning (du Gay et al, 2013; Fairclough, 1992, 2010) across three different professions; Police, Government and Public Relations, in relation to television representations. Our previous research notes an unfolding or broadening out of professional identities within the cultural sphere of professional life, in the “location between liberal feminism and femininity” (Lewis, 2014, p.1857). Across all three professions, tensions between gendered ideologies, television representations and lived realities are played out with multi-layered responses of participants navigating through complex and often clashing cultural constructs. Our research both builds on and challenges the emerging set of post-

feminist discourses by offering insight into the emerging multiplicity of femininities (Lewis, 2014, p.1851) within a broadening, inclusive and open cultural space.

Exploring the problematic and often paradoxical nature of post-feminism became imperative – in a post-feminist climate a key issue to be addressed as noted by (Kelan, 2008a, 2009, 2010 in Lewis, (2014 p. 1846), Simpson and Lewis, Simpson; “where women’s belief that they are equal means that ongoing sources of inequality are ignored, rendered invisible and have become increasingly difficult to name”. This was of great concern to our thinking and underpinned our need to gain empirical intelligence as a starting point in our theorizing. In appreciating and learning from past research in this area we deploy post feminism iteratively, as a construct arising out of our secondary readings and our empirical data under the premise that post feminism (Kelan in Lewis, p.1846) “as a critical concept can direct critical attention to the kinds of subject’s women (and men) are being asked to become”.

Word count - 453

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